PRESS RELEASE

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Sweet Berries, Short Season: Connecticut's Strawberry Growers Face Growing Challenges

New Haven, CT - Each summer, Connecticut comes alive with rows of strawberries ripe for picking, and families wander fields throughout the state with baskets in hand. Strawberries have long been a beloved crop in the state, both culturally and as a valuable crop for farmers in an increasingly competitive market. But for those who grow and study them, the sweetness of this crop is increasingly tempered by a bitter truth: Connecticut strawberries are under threat.

Strawberries have existed in the Northeast since long before colonial times, but the modern strawberries that are eaten today were created by crossing wild strawberries from the eastern United States with a related woodland strawberry native to Chile. It became quickly apparent that Connecticut's well-drained soils made it an ideal region for this new crop, and by the 1920's The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station (CAES) was working to breed varieties better adapted to the state. Through the mid-20th century, strawberries became a staple of small-scale farms, and by the mid-1960s, Mr. Terry Jones of Jones Family Farm helped to establish strawberries as one of the dominant crops in the region. Today, over 120 farms across Connecticut grow strawberries, many of which depend on the crop to support their spring revenue before other crops like tomatoes, blueberries, and sweet corn arrive.

In recent years, the state has seen increasingly erratic and extreme weather patterns that are disrupting this once reliable crop. Historically warm winters can cause premature flowering, making plants more vulnerable to sudden spring frosts. Heavy rainfall during bloom or fruiting can lead to fruit rotting in the field, while sudden droughts can stress plants and reduce fruit size. For farmers, timing has always been

everything, but with a late frost one year and a two-inch downpour the next, it has become harder to plan and increasingly difficult to maintain a healthy, reliable harvest.

While these trends have been building for years, 2023 was a tipping point on many Connecticut farms, with a mixture of historic flooding and air pollution caused by the Canadian wildfires in the same season. That year, multiple new diseases of strawberry were documented in the state, likely exacerbated by these weather extremes. Unlike the annual strawberry production systems used in the southern U.S., where plants are removed and replaced each season, the perennial system common in the Northeast allows strawberries to overwinter in the same soil for several years. This approach offers clear benefits for soil health through the reduction in chemical fumigants and preservation of soil structure, but it also means that pests and pathogens have more time to establish and persist. CAES scientists estimate that a majority of the strawberry acreage that survived the 2023 season now harbors lingering root damage, which continues to suppress yields. These factors combined are leading to predictions of one of the smallest crops on record across the state this year.

With the future of Connecticut strawberries in danger, CAES is running experimental trials across the state to develop new methods for increasing strawberry resilience on farms, but this isn't just a farm issue: it's a community one. If strawberries are to remain a part of Connecticut's agricultural landscape, continued investment is needed in local agricultural research, climate resilience programs, and policies that support small and mid-sized farms. Just as important, though, is the role of the public. Visiting local farms, picking your own berries, and choosing Connecticut-grown produce at markets and grocery stores help keep these operations viable. Every pint, quart, or basket purchased is an investment in the future of local agriculture.

Connecticut strawberries remain some of the best in the world, but growing them has never been more complicated. With science, collaboration, and support, these challenges can be met, and the joy of Connecticut strawberries can be kept alive for the next generation. It's not just about surviving; it's about helping strawberries thrive in the Northeast for decades to come.

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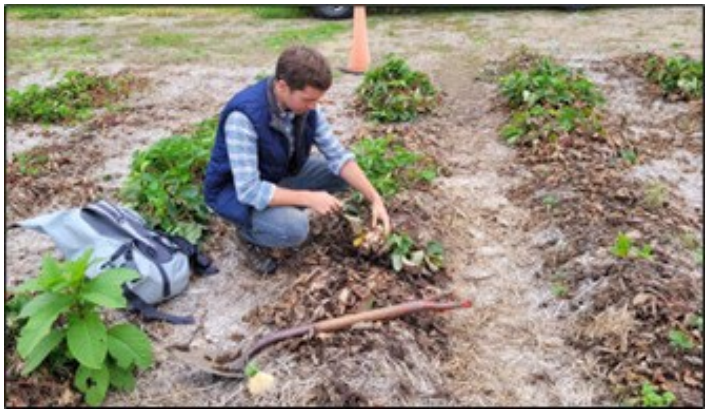

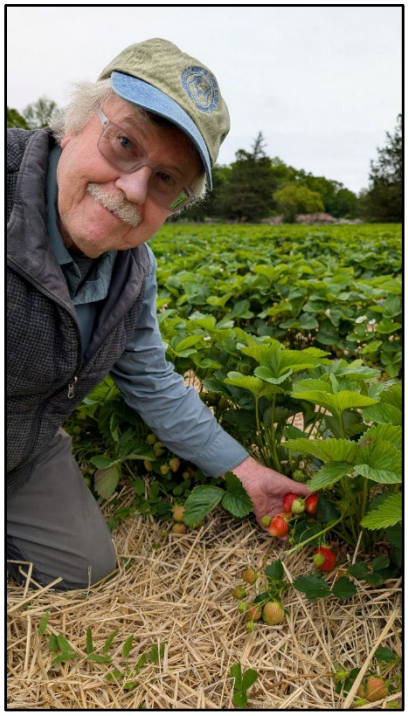

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